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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S TRIP TO RHODES DURING USS TRUMAN
VISIT FORGES FRIENDSHIPS

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SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED -- PROTECT ACCORDINGLY

SUMMARY

11. (U) Ambassador Speckhard visited Rhodes May 7-9 in conjunction with the visit of the USS Truman, a U.S. Navy nuclear-powered aircraft carrier transiting the Mediterranean on its return to Norfolk from nearly seven months in the Persian Gulf. The visit afforded the Ambassador the opportunity to meet with the island's local officials and forge lasting relationships. The event was well-received in the media with extensive and positive national and local coverage. Moreover, the ship's 5000-strong crew were warmly welcomed by the inhabitants of Rhodes who were thrilled to benefit from the ship's cash injection to the economy at the outset of the tourist season. In addition to participating in courtesy calls with the ship's Rear Admiral and Captain, the Ambassador and the Rear Admiral co-hosted a ship-board reception with dignitaries and a large reception with a variety of local and national figures. Other meetings were with New Democracy Member of Parliament, Aritotelis Pavlidis, the Bishop of Rhodes, and a joint dinner with the Mayor, the Nomarch, and the Chairman of the City Council. He also attended a ship-sponsored community outreach program where crew volunteered to clean the island's historic Rodini Park as well as a May 9 wreath laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. These events are detailed on the Embassy website: <http://athens.usembassy.gov>.

COURTESY CALLS: MESSAGE OF FRIENDSHIP

12. (U) Ambassador Speckhard, Rear Admiral Mark Fox, and Captain Herm Shelanski met with the Nomarch of Dodecanese, Mr. Ioannis Mahairidis; the Mayor of Rhodes, Chatzis Chatziefthimiou; Bishop Kyrillos of Rhodes; Chief of Police COL Ioannis Mesodiakakis; and local Coast Guard and National Guard officials. The Ambassador, Rear Admiral, and Captain consistently reiterated the message of our two countries' long and enduring friendship that is based on mutual respect, underscoring the importance of our bilateral relations and relaying sentiments of gratitude and honor to have the opportunity to be so warmly received in such a beautiful locale.

13. (SBU) With the Mayor and Normarch, Ambassador Speckhard highlighted the economic incentives associated with the visit of the 5000 American crew. The Admiral and Captain added that Rhodes was the sailors' first choice for a port call, and they were prepared to come ashore and comport themselves as goodwill ambassadors. With tourism on the island experiencing a slight downturn in part due to a declining dollar, both officials were pleased to continue the tradition of hosting U.S. military vessels that started in the 1960s. During meetings with the police, harbor master, and the National Guard Battalion, all extended sincere appreciation for the close cooperation and tireless efforts the local authorities expended to deliver the highest-level security standards required during U.S. military vessel visits. The Bishop, who wields significant influence throughout the island, noted that the ship visits are valuable. He hoped the crew would learn about the Dodecanese islands and forge lasting relationships with Greeks.

SHIP RECEPTION: ATTENDANCE GOOD FOR POST-EASTER WEEKEND

14. (U) Despite the fact that the USS Truman arrived in Rhodes just after Orthodox Easter, turnout for the ship's evening reception was relatively high. In addition to VIP guests at the reception including New Democracy Member of Parliament (MP) Aritotelis Pavlidis and PASOK MP Nikos Zoides, Deputy Minister of the Merchant Marines Panos Kammenos, the Nomarch, the Mayor, and the Commander of the Naval Aegean Command, the ship's hanger deck was also filled with influential members of the Greek Orthodox Church, Greek military, business, and shipping communities for the main reception. Speeches echoed a theme of friendship and

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respect. Selected members of the Greek press corps were escorted by Embassy IO, having toured the ship and held a press conference with the Ambassador, Admiral and the Captain earlier.

DINNER WITH MP PAVLIDIS: FRANCE-GREECE-RUSSIA

15. (SBU) Ambassador and his wife joined Pavlidis, the British Consul, and others for dinner where the Ambassador steered conversation toward Greek-Russian and Greek-French relations. Regarding the former, Pavlidis said his country is creating a "three-legged stool" balancing act between Russian and U.S. interests in Greece, saying that Greece has an important role to play in the region through energy. On Greece and France, Pavlidis informally confirmed a June Sarkozy visit to Athens. (Note: Sarkozy is now reportedly set to visit Athens on June 6. End note.), He also alluded to the fact that Sarkozy may join the ranks of a handful of world leaders (Eisenhower, DeGaulle, George H.W. Bush) to be permitted to address the Greek Parliament. When asked why Sarkozy would receive this honor, the MP struggled with a response that included the important role France plays in business circles in Greece and Sarkozy's support for Greece's veto of Macedonia's entrance into NATO at the April summit in Bucharest. The topic of Greece's role in the Middle East was briefly addressed, with Pavlidis explaining that Greece is uniquely placed to serve a key role in Middle East peace negotiations given its proximity to the region, its trusted position as a neutral party, and a keen understanding of the issues. He noted that Greece will sponsor a group of Eastern Mediterranean MPs June 11-12 to discuss the Middle East.

BISHOP KYRILLOS: ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH AND HALKI

16. (SBU) Bishop Kyrillos of Rhodes is a significant community religious leader who wields considerable influence

throughout the island. The Bishop explained that his position has an administrative emphasis as well as social responsibilities, with duties that include large-scale building renovations, public relations obligations, and servicing the needs of communities that include the elderly, orphans, the poor, addressing problems Rhodes and the Dodecanese have from illegal immigrant children that come over from Turkey, and other needy members of society. He is pleased with the direction taken by the new Archbishop of Athens and all Greece, Ieronymos, and feels his approach to concentrate on spiritual activities and less on politics will be less divisive. He also explained that the Church of the Dodecanese falls under the supervision of the Ecumenical Patriarch's Synod in Istanbul and not the Archbishop of Athens.

17. (SBU) Bishop Kyrillos characterized Greece as a traditionally religious society with the largest active congregation in Europe and no visible influences to distract them from their spiritual commitment at this time. While there is a surplus of priests in Crete, Northern Greece is experiencing a dearth of clergy, a situation which is exacerbated by the fact that Greece must supply priests to its international congregations as well (such as Australia, Jerusalem, and Egypt). According to Kyrillos, only the U.S. produces Greek-American priests internally and does not depend upon Greece. The Bishop described the seat of the Ecumenical Patriarch, however, as a more pressing problem. Given that Turkey only permits clergy of Turkish origin to serve in Istanbul, with a declining number of Greeks of Turkish origin residing in Istanbul, it becomes increasingly difficult to replace the Ecumenical Patriarch. Moreover, there is no religious school in Turkey to educate its members because of the ongoing difficulties surrounding the Halki Seminary. The Bishop highlighted this ongoing political issue as one of his Church's major concerns. He added that the Turks would benefit from the opening of Halki from an economic standpoint. A functioning Seminary would produce more priests, and more priests would contribute to a more robust Patriarchate which in turn would boost Greek tourism to Turkey, according to the Bishop.

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18. (U) On a more positive note, the Bishop added that locally, his Church is working on a project to build 200 rooms in the form of small houses to accommodate people in need, regardless of creed. Noting the island's economic and social disparities, Bishop Kyrillos also explained that single mothers, battered wives, and women left destitute behind on the island constitute the majority of needy in Rhodes. The new houses would go far to assist this strata of Rhodes society, to be added to the Church's role in maintaining an island orphanage for abandoned children.

LOCAL OFFICIALS: PARTNERSHIPS, ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

19. (U) The festive dinner on the evening following the USS Truman reception was a great success, with officials breaking into serenades at the meal's completion. Relationships between the Ambassador and the local officials were solidified, with much talk regarding the beauty of the island, the gracious and hospitable inhabitants, the vast history and culture, and return visits. Greek officials reiterated the pleasure of hosting the U.S. military and the great benefits the visits bring to the island.

110. (U) The Mayor expressed his desire to expand further a U.S.-Greek connection on Rhodes by instituting t to Qfort that might be of interest to American students. The Aegean University on Rhodes and the Municipality of Rhodes are hosting the first annual meeting to discuss projects for cooperation between the university and municipality on May 16, and the topic of

international university partnerships will be a major focus. According to the Mayor, the Minister of Culture is scheduled to attend, in addition to U.S. and UK academics.

¶11. (SBU) The Nomarch broached the subjects of the Macedonia name issue and illegal immigration throughout the Dodecanese islands. He reiterated well-known Greek positions regarding Macedonia and elucidated on the mounting numbers of illegal child migrants of various nationalities reaching the islands through transiting Turkey. According to the Nomarch, these children are often dispersed to special camps throughout the Dodecanese and then sent to Athens upon adulthood, where they are united with their ethnic groups residing in Athens. To further complicate matters, the Nomarch said that child smugglers manning the boats that transport children to the Dodecanese from Turkey are often juveniles themselves (aged between fifteen and eighteen), which means they cannot stand trial and complicates deportation efforts.

PRESS: WIDE-SPREAD, POSITIVE COVERAGE

¶12. (U) The USS Truman visit to Rhodes and the Ambassador's presence on the island were well-received in the media, with extensive, positive local coverage as well as national exposure. Press was on hand throughout the initial courtesy calls between U.S. officials and local authorities in order to record the interviews and film gift exchanges, with widespread, positive local coverage. The reception press conference held in the ship's Flag Bridge was cordial. Hellenic Public TV (ET) filmed a live morning report from the flight deck of the USS Truman on May 8, and had live Saturday, May 9, talk show coverage by national ALPHA TV. Press and media coverage was provided at the ship's community outreach program whereby volunteer crew cleaned up the historic Rodini Park in an effort for the ship to "give back to the community" and also at the WWII wreath laying presentation that the Ambassador attended on May 9 to commemorate the end of WWII in Rhodes. Like the Rhodes inhabitants themselves, press and media appeared pleased to welcome the ship and its crew to the island and to have the opportunity to meet and speak with the Ambassador and military. See also <http://athens.usembassy.gov> for a

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description and photo gallery.

COMMENT

¶13. (SBU) Ambassador Speckhard's trip to Rhodes during the visit of the USS Truman aircraft carrier was a resounding success. Not only did the visit receive extensive, positive media coverage, the Ambassador was able to forge lasting friendships with local officials that will surely prove useful throughout the duration of his Ambassadorship in Greece. The message of friendship and mutual respect resonated well with his interlocutors, and the local officials were left with the impression that Rhodes is a prime destination for U.S. military vessels.
COUNTRYMAN